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ABSTRACT

Reading aloud to children is an important facet of the literate home environment and the best preparation for the establishment of preschool literacy skills. David was read to at every opportunity, and a diary was kept to observe, record, and study his emergent literacy events in the home. Since David often asked to have the same books read to him, he eventually committed them to memory. While listening, he worked very hard at acquiring literacy skills by questioning, rhyming, punning, and guessing. David's earliest use of literary language included his lifting of formulaic phrases from texts and employing them in his own play and narrative. Literature became an important part of his information background, his language and concept development, and fuel for his imagination. David also learned to match the words that he was saying with the print that he saw in the books and consequently learned to read without formal instruction. He learned comprehension and decoding skills as he needed them and not in a predetermined order. Reading aloud to children is usually considered "enrichment" in the elementary school classroom, but the experience with David shows that it should be made an important element in reading instruction. Appended to this study is a list of the complete titles and authors of the children's books cited and 25 references. (NKA)

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"Look - All of these words in a row start the same as me!"

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Once David and I were walking together at the "Y". An older woman came toward us and said to him (age 2:8) "What big eyes you have!" to which David answered, "The better to see you with my dear!"

This vignette is one of hundreds that I have collected of my son's emergent literacy. David was able to take his literature based background into his daily life and make it work for him. He freely took language from texts and used these literary phrases in his daily speech and likewise brought information from daily life into the book reading session. In addition, he was able to compare one text to another. Heath (1980) discusses "ways of taking" from books in preschool situations. She uses this term to identify the learned behavior as it is modeled by school-oriented parents.

Home background and literacy development

In this essay I shall discuss my son's growth in preschool literacy skills which emanated from the literature which was read to him. I will demonstrate the context laden literacy as it developed over time. By looking at intensive story reading with *david, I was able to observe the tremendous impact that literature has upon literacy. Such observations of emergent literacy through literature continue to lead to recommendations for teaching programs. We can glean the experiences of the "natural reader" (such as this one) and apply them to early reading programs with the knowledge that we are using a successful model.

Reading aloud to preschoolers, and the bedtime story in particular, has long been considered a significant facet of literacy learning. That children must develop an understanding of "book language" and listening to written prose is generally accepted as a way to develop such an understanding (Teale 1978). Indeed, Teale, building on other researchers, has suggested that listening to book reading makes the listener cognizant of the language structure of stories (Mandler and Johnson 1977;

Thorndike 1977) which then helps them understand stories when they are reading (Guthrie 1977). Wells (1982) goes on to say that listening to story reading is a "best" preparation for literacy. Reading "methods" books propose reading aloud to children (Clay 1972, p. 17; Harris and Sipay 1975, p. 30; Huey 1908, p. 332). Many studies report that reading aloud to children is an important facet of the literate home environment (Clark 1976; Durkin 1966; Gardner 1970; Hoffman 1983; Schickendanz 1978; Schickendanz and Sullivan 1984).

My Study - An Insider's View of How Literacy Evolved from Literature

David was born into a book-oriented environment. Since both of his older sisters had been early readers, it seemed reasonable to assume that David, too, would become a successful reader. I decided to follow the process from its early stages, to document the experiences and interactions that would go into the making of a literate preschooler. By looking at this contextualized evolution of literacy in the home environment, I was able to analyze all of the interrelated contributors to literacy. It gave me the opportunity to observe a successful learner and to analyze those aspects of the home "curriculum" which worked for David. I would then be able to apply these experiences in other situations such as home or school interventions. When Teale (1986) discusses this type of study and its unquestionable value for research he corroborates by saying "Such completeness is of crucial importance when it comes to implications for instruction or home intervention programs. Without a firm understanding of

the context, what seem to be well-formed curricula for literacy development often go astray, because they have neglected part of what is entailed in the home environment." (p. 174)

For two years (ages 2:6 to 4:6) I used the diary method to observe, record, and study David's emergent literacy events in our home environment. I kept a complete record of the books that I read to David along with his verbal and nonverbal interactions before, during, and after reading aloud. I also recorded his references to books - either genre, characters, or vocabulary; his reading wise - behaviors; his repetition of book language; his sentence lifting; his recitation; his spontaneous and other directed dramatizations of books; his elicited and spontaneous retelling of stories; his metalinguistic awareness as revealed by comments as it relates to reading; his interaction with and manipulation of print; and his early "reading" behaviors.

As I did with his two older sisters, I read to David every night before bedtime. Thus it was a "given" aspect of the bedtime routine from six months of age on. Additionally, David was frequently told a bedtime story by his father. Both the oral book reading and the story telling became part of his bedtime ritual which included his choosing from 5 to 12 books nightly to be read from top to bottom. I read to David as a parent does with a child on a one-on-one basis. Our book reading took place on his bed in which he and I sat side-by-side with the book in clear view of both of us. (As an infant, however, I read to him in the rocking chair with him on my lap.)

Bedtime was not the only time that David heard books. He heard books throughout the day when he was sick and wanted

companionship; when he waited for the car to be serviced; in the waiting room of the doctor's office and whenever he brought over a book and asked to be read to. Book reading, then, was woven throughout his many daily activities (see Heath 1980 for a similar discussion of the way in which books are integrated into the daily routine in mainstream homes).

David was in control of our readings with the discussion originating from him. He would request that a book be read three times in full or in part or even backward (see Schickendanz 1978; Hoffman 1983). I followed his learning style and did not interrupt the flow of the story line with "comprehension" questions. This learner-teacher style differs from conventional school instruction whereby the teacher poses focusing questions before, during, and after story reading (Durkin 1978-1979).

David was permitted and encouraged to choose his own books in the library, in the bookstore, and at home from his personal library. He usually chose books according to a current interest. Because of this self-selection and topic-centered reading, David became an active participant in the book reading sessions. He had a keen interest in the subject matter or the genre and was quick to clarify points with questions. He was enticed into the world of books by his own interests and tastes. He learned from books and developed his own background of information which he in turn used in his oral language first and later in his read and written language.

From the hundreds of hours of book readings, David developed a distinct "literary" vocabulary even though he was still a non-

reader. He seemed to be aware of the differences between oral and written language which is an important part of the process of learning to read. He discovered the meanings of words as he incorporated book language into his daily conversation. David became aware of the special nature of written language and learned when and how to use these "book words" appropriately in his own oral language. He easily traveled back and forth from books to life. He became so familiar with the books' contents that he was able to integrate, synthesize, and utilize the contents as if they were his own. He drew upon his literary background in his speaking first and later in his reading and writing. His early reading guesses were within the domain of his then familiar knowledge of written language.

Literacy Events Emerge from the Literature

David brought his own life to books by interspersing the text of a storyline with everyday conversation; he asked questions of vocabulary; he brought his background of experiences into the reading of book genre and setting; and he was able to related the texts to his own life situations. Outside of the book reading dyad he used book vocabulary; he imitated literary syntax and story grammars; he related one text to another; he role-played and dramatized storyline characters; and he told and re-told stories.

David developed his literacy skills in a gradual spiralling sequence. The process began long before he even focused upon the print that was before him. He developed these skills slowly and after many hours of book reading. Yet within the long process there emerged a pattern of development.

The Evolution of Pretend Reading to Reading

Since David often asked to have the same books read to him repeatedly, he eventually committed them to memory. He later learned to match the words that he was saying with the print that he saw in the books and consequently learned to read without formal instruction. His learning was neither spontaneous nor did he learn "on his own." While I read to him, he worked very hard at acquiring literacy skills by listening, questioning, rhyming, punning, and guessing. He did this all in a positive home environment in which four other family members knew and interacted with him and his literacy endeavors.

I recorded his literacy development (or evolution if you will) and noted developmental stages. While at first he would "read along" with me, he later became confident enough with the literature to include some "reading alone." Within this process David learned to use flexible "reading registers." By using different reading registers for different print settings, David demonstrated a "functional expectation for written language" (Harste, et. al. 1979). Harste, et. al. found a similar ability in all of the children in their study.

As early as age 2:10 David held a storybook right side up in front of him and told the story as he turned the pages appropriately. At this age he would invert a storybook if he had picked it up upside down. David interspersed my reading with his own word, phrase or sentence as he remembered. This behavior became more frequent as a book became more familiar. Again, there was much repetition of storybook reading at David's

request. Pretend reading developed over time; it did not just happen. When I read the book David and the Giant David emphatically pronounced the last line, "David will be king!" (age 4:1). On another occasion he didactically "read" all of the signs that Gus left for the mouse in Gus was a Friendly Ghost. (4:5). And on still other occasions one could hear him "read" an entire story aloud to his stuffed animals while he waited for me to come in to read to him.

"One day, Brer Fox and Brer Bear wuz sittin' in de woods, talkin' about de way Brer Rabbit wuz always cuttin' up capers an actin' so fresh."
(from Uncle Remus Stories pp. 10-16; Hoffman 1982, p. 71.)

When David was 3:3, he took out his brochure from Linvilla Orchards. At first he held it upside-down, and then he turned it around and "read" in a staccato commanding voice, "It says, 'Don't take hayrides,' see, Daddy?" His father answered that no, it said "David is a good boy." David knowingly answered, "No, you're only kidding Daddy. It's about Linvilla Orchards." He knew that the print that was in this leaflet had to be about the orchards. He also knew that the print did not contain a story. He demonstrated an active responsiveness to the content and context of the print in such a way that one can see the use of his comprehension skills before he learned to decode. He knew the theme or function of print by its form, layout, and setting.

Once David became familiar enough with his books to "read" them himself, he became aware of the fact that print tracks sound. On one occasion he covered the print with his hands during reading time and dared me to "Go on and try to read - Let's see if you can do it. Ha ha ha ha ha..." (age 3:5). He

knew, at that time, that what I was saying emanated from the print on the page. On another occasion when I was reading the poem, "The Skyscraper", David noticed that every other line begins with "Do." He pointed to this and said, "Look! - all of these words in a row start the same as me! What's the word?" (3:3) ("Starts the same as me" means that they start with his first initial). On still another occasion he told me that he could tell that a book was Peter Rabbit. He pointed to the title on the cover and said the words as he moved his finger along (4:0). This print awareness evolved as David practiced pretend reading and gradually progressed to reading.

Formulaic Phrases or Making Words Work for Him

David's earliest uses of literary language included his lifting of formulaic phrases from texts and employing them in his own play and narrative. In the example cited at the onset of this essay, David lifted a phrase - "the better to see you with my dear" - and incorporated it into his own life when the proper key phrase was said. When David was 2:10, his father was upstairs when he said, "Hey, do you hear that rain on the roof?" David answered, "Rain makes applesauce - it usually makes thunder though." While "Rain makes applesauce" is a direct quote from the book of the same name, David hinted at his knowledge of the difference between fantasy and reality. These examples of formulaic language point to David's ability to take his literacy-based background into his daily life and make it work for him.

Integrating Book Vocabulary Into Everyday Life

Literature became an important part of David's background of

information, his language and concept development, and fuel for his imagination. He took the language from books and assimilated it into his own life and conversation until it became his own. Yet, he seemed to know that books were books and real life was "the here and now." He played with the boundary between fictional and real worlds. Sometimes my use of a word would trigger a response from a familiar book. One day, when David was 3 years old, he wanted his dinner faster than I could prepare it. When I told him that he would have to wait he said, "I want to eat right now." I replied, "You must still think that I'm a magician" to which he answered "The magicians are with King Pharoah and not here!" David used his literary background in order to sort out the meaning of the word "magician." While he knew what a magician was in a familiar Bible story, he also knew that these magicians could not be in the kitchen.

On another occasion, when David was 3 years 11 months, I found him studying a new pair of shoelaces, which he knew were black. "Are these as black as ebony?" he asked, invoking the simillie used to describe Snow White's hair." Here, too, David demonstrated how he could use and incorporate literary language. He went on to tease out nuances of meaning when he discussed the meanings of magician and black.

David compares and plays with words

David became so familiar with the texts and the literary language that he began to compare words across texts and to play with the language. One day, when David was 3 years 2 months old, I read The Story of Ping to him and read the words "rice cakes." David heard the words and asked "Are the rice cakes like the rice

cakes in Tikki Tikki Tembo?" He compared the new vocabulary word to his frame of reference which was in Tikki Tikki Tembo.

On another occasion David played on the multiple meaning of the word "nursery." When he was 3 years 7 months, I read the book A Farm to him. When I read the part about plants being in a nursery David teasingly asked, "Nursery? It is time for school now?" Not realizing that he fully understood, I answered that plants are in a nursery. Then David incorporated both meanings and laughingly said, "Oh, are they going to water all of the children in school to make them grow too? Ha ha ha ha ha..."

A "Natural" Reader Works Hard and Gets a Head Start

David delighted in his ability to use literary language in his own daily conversation. Books were his background of information and his frame of reference. He referred to them as if they were his own. He could decontextualize, compare, analyze and pun. He enjoyed teasing, playing tricks and jokes, and actively giving information. With this rich background he would find the language familiar when he would come to read books for himself. (see Wells 1982 for discussion).

Wells concluded from his longitudinal Learning to Read Project that home literature/literacy made a difference which was established when the children entered school. He showed that the major influence in accounting for differences between children was the home, particularly during preschool-grade two (1982; 1986, p. 194). With this in mind it becomes even more important to observe successful home environments as they occur (and not retrospectively) in order to learn what works.

Clearly literacy can begin in the preschool years and need not wait for formal classroom instruction. In this case study, literature and literacy were integral parts of David's lifestyle; they were imbedded and intertwined in his daily activities and avenues. He did not learn to read through formal instruction, but instead by a "natural" home literature laden process. He learned his comprehension and decoding skills as he needed them and not in a predetermined order. The fact is that he usually "knew" his stories years before he was able to read them. For the most part school instruction stands in contrast to David's natural learning style.

How Can We Apply This to Early Reading Programs

Clearly, this naturalistic diary study which looks closely at the transition from a non-reader to a reader has relevance for elementary school reading programs. What we observe is a success story for reading aloud to a child. Research has told us that it is "good" to read to preschoolers and that children who are read to regularly learn to read on their own. David shows us how it happened and what we can learn from his experiences.

It is significant that David's development of literacy skills did not follow a neat sequence of one skill followed by a more complex skill and so on. Rather, his behaviors spiraled constantly developing and expanding through recursive issues of literacy. In addition, David freely moved on to new areas of interest as he tired of others. He chose his own books and had his own timetable for learning which I encouraged to be largely self-initiated, self-paced, self-structured, and frequently self-

terminated. David was an active and full participant in his learning from the first.

Significant also is the time that David spent with books and their related literacy events. By the time he entered first grade he had been read to for several thousand hours. Consequently his development of early language was enriched by literature. He learned multiple meanings of words, refined meanings of others, built a "literary" vocabulary, learned to differentiate fact from fantasy, and was able to play with lexical relationships.

While reading aloud to children is considered to be a positive contributor to the elementary school classroom, it usually falls under the heading of "enrichment". Rarely is reading aloud and the resulting literature discussion considered to be the early reading curriculum. On the contrary, formal reading instruction follows a skills oriented method whereby one skill is followed by a more advanced skill. In this method, decoding preceeds comprehension. Basal readers, workbooks and worksheets, seatwork, early emphasis on phonics and round robin reading are all reflections of such a skills approach (Putnam 1986). This sequential skills approach (or "bottom up" if you will) is contradicted by current research (Anderson et. al. 1985; Allington 1977; Hoffman 1982, 1983; Mason et. al. 1984; Putnam 1983).

An encouraging phenomena is the recent increase of more holistic reading practices and programs for the classroom (Anderson et. al. 1985; Mason et. al. 1984; Seaver and Botel 1982; Allington 1977). In addition there is an increase in the

use of authentic childrens literature in classrooms in the early years. A direct implication from research is the importance of reading aloud in the classroom and allowing for sufficient silent reading time.

Educators can become informed by studies of "natural readers" such as this one and "take" those positive experiences that could work in classrooms. The bedtime story hour and all of its interrelated literary events can be used as a model for early reading programs.

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